

Conference Abstract

# After the Fall

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## Abstract

On November 17, 2016 in the Department of Botany at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), one of the electrical compactor bays suffered a catastrophic failure of the electrical system resulting in the unit malfunctioning. All safety measures in the unit failed causing the collapse of 17 herbarium cases containing part of our Fabaceae collection and damaging 14 additional cases as they fell to the floor. These three minutes of chaos lead to a yearlong recovery process.

A safeguard for such a disaster is digitization. In this row all but one of the cases had been completely imaged and inventoried into our database system. These records provided a way to note both the damage and conservation treatments used for each sheet.

A team of individuals with various experts, is required to fully recover from a disaster. In the first critical minutes after the disaster, the building facility team and department staff mobilized to secure and clean the area. Over the following weeks; the conservation team based in NMNH assessed the damage, while the herbarium staff created swing space. The NMNH Collection Program provided the personnel to check the 19,241 specimens affected by the collapse. The Informatics team helped to fine-tune the conservation module in our database, which was used to note treatments. Finally, the Smithsonian National Collection Program provided vital funds to rebuild the collapsed compactor and to convert the remaining three compactors to function safely.

A review of the disaster is the final step in the process. There were areas where our response was perfect while there were other areas where improvement is needed. In reality

a procedure on paper may not account for all of the variables that could happen during a disaster. A disaster procedure can provide a basic outline but needs to be flexible in a real life situation.

Before a disaster strikes, the staff should review the collection area with a “new set of eyes.” There are many hidden dangers in plain sight. Another important tool is digitization. Digitalization is critical for preserving the collections. Digital records provides a reference to note conservation treatments if needed. Finally, it is the staff that provides the experience and physical effort necessary for the clean-up. Training is important as well as building connections to reserves of experience either internally among the staff or externally such as connections to the SPNHC community.

## **Keywords**

Disaster Response, Collection Management,

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